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Soviets said to recover bodies in KAL jet crash

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TOKYO — On Sept. 1, 1983, 269 passengers and crew were expected to arrive at Kimpo International Airport in Seoul, South Korea, aboard Korean Air Lines Flight 007 from New York.

Two years later, relatives and friends of passengers on the ill-fated flight are still waiting to find out how they died in the icy seas north of Japan after a Soviet fighter shot down the plane.

"Very few facts have been revealed during these two years," Yutaka Hata, a member of Japan's upper house, said this week.

"We have barely put the spotlight on the tip of the iceberg," he said.

As a member of the Diet, or parliament, Mr. Hata has urged the government to release any information it can on the incident. In response to Mr. Hata, the government recently revealed that the altitude of the airliner registered by Japanese military radar differed significantly from that the pilot was reporting to air traffic controllers in Tokyo.

The information also showed that the airliner changed altitude at least twice by some 3,000 feet but the pilot failed to notify air traffic controllers, as required.

The incident occurred in an area where U.S. and Japanese military units stand face to face with Soviet forces.

Those attempting to find out more about KAL Flight 007 have found that the nations involved are reluctant to provide further information for fear of compromising their military and surveillance activities.

Japanese defense officials recently expressed regret for providing a tape of

transmissions between the Soviet fighter pilot, who shot down the plane, and his base because of its effect on surveillance activities.

The tape was played by the United States during a meeting of the United Nations Secretary Council. It is thought to have played a major role in the Soviet decision to acknowledge that its air force "stopped the flight" of the civilian airliner.

The jetliner was headed from Anchorage to Seoul when it was shot down. The

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most perplexing problem for many of the victims' relatives is that no bodies have been recovered.

"The Soviets ... should quickly hand over the bodies and effects of passengers and crew recovered from its territory and territorial waters in the vicinity of the (crash site)," a group of victims' relatives said in a statement this week.

"It's very irresponsible of the Soviet Union to say no bodies were recovered," Shun Oide, a member of the House of Representatives said this week.

Mr. Oide recalled that more than 100

bodies were recovered following the crash of an Air India jetliner in the North Atlantic earlier this year.

Mr. Oide appeared at a news conference with members of the Japan Association for Inquiry into the Truth of the KAL Incident, a group of relatives of Japanese victims backed by the several members of the Diet.

"We have very reliable information that a substantial number of bodies were recovered by the Soviet Union," Yutaro Masuo, a spokesman for the relatives' association said.

The KAL flight veered from its intended course into Soviet air space, most likely because the plane's crew fed incorrect information into the automatic navigational equipment, according to a report issued by the International Civil Air Organization.

A report compiled within three months of the incident has been followed by many books and articles attempting to throw more light on what happened. But ICAO Secretary General Yves Lambert said recently that the body stands by its original conclusions.

"To date, ICAO has received no additional data, evidence or information that would suggest the need to amend the ICAO report," Mr. Lambert said in a letter addressed to the Japanese relatives organization which was dated June 21.

No report has answered why the Soviet Union, which has acknowledged that it tracked the jetliner's movements closely for 2½ hours, did not attempt to contact U.S., Japanese or South Korean authorities to identify the aircraft.

The mechanism for such contacts may become more efficient as the result of an agreement being negotiated between the United States, Japan and the Soviets.

Officials from the three countries agreed last month to establish a new channel of communication between air traffic controllers in Anchorage, Tokyo and Khabarovsk, according to Japanese and U.S. officials.